

'Student' Katzenbach Learns About Vietnam

By Ward Just

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SAIGON, Oct. 13—The education of Nicholas de Belleville Katzenbach in the complexities of the war in Vietnam may be said to have begun in Nhonhau Hamlet, a collection of huts and rice fields astride Route 4, about 30 miles south of Saigon in Longan Province.

It was a hamlet into which

had been thrust one of the new 59-man revolutionary development teams. The people of the hamlet had requested the team, and as Katzenbach, wearing a floppy white hat, slopped through the mud he shook hands with black-clad village elders, say the cadre at work, was told of progress made and progress anticipated.

All seemed well.

Yet the sine qua non of hamlet security was missing: The hamlet chief, frightened by Vietcong threats, did not sleep in the hamlet at night. This single fact overshadowed all other facts, and rendered many of them meaningless.

"Yes, we know it," a Katzenbach aide said. "Even in Washington we know that the first question you ask is if the chief sleeps in. This one doesn't," the aide shrugged.

This was Katzenbach's first trip to Vietnam, and his first foreign journey since becoming Under Secretary of State early this month. "I am new at this job," he said on leaving Vietnam this evening. "I am very glad I came over here."

What Katzenbach knew of Vietnam, apart from his slight official involvement as Attorney General, was what he read in the newspapers and heard from friends and colleagues.

"I don't care how well the pieces are written, how well the writers describe it," he said. "You have got to see it for yourself. You have got to see yourself what others are trying to describe."

He saw a provincial capital and a hamlet and a district and battalion of American infantry, the first in the Mekong Delta. There were four separ-

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Katzenbach 'Studies' Vietnam

ate sorties by helicopter. The Under Secretary did more listening than talking, but at the end of the day his shirt was wet with perspiration and he had seen the terrain. He had gotten down to where the nuts and bolts are.

Katzenbach's mission, unlike that of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, was not for the purpose of making decisions, although he will doubtless bring back to Washington impressions that will result in changes. His purpose was to see for himself the situation that will inevitably become his main preoccupation as the No. 2 man in the State Department.

At first there were briefings in Saigon.

There were briefings on force levels, ours and theirs, briefings on infiltration rates, defectors, weapons captured, schoolrooms built, revolutionary development cadre teams trained. There was talk about South Vietnam's army, and what could be done to improve it. There were the personal assessments of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and the commanding general of U.S. forces, Gen. William C. Westmoreland.

Late Wednesday night, he met with a few newsmen, most of whom differs on the nature and solution of the problem. Somebody asked him whether all the military charts and graphs weren't a bit overwhelming and someone else — not Katzenbach — replied dryly that any man who had dealt with the FBI for five years was unlikely to be overwhelmed by charts and graphs.

On Thursday, helicopters were laid on for a trip to Long An Province, the strip of land that lies just south of Saigon, the opening to the delta and a province in which security was said to be slowly improving.

Katzenbach is a big, heavy, shambling, slightly stooped man with a hesitant smile and manner. On his instructions, formalities were cut to a minimum. He and his party, which included one personal aide and three embassy officials, landed at Tanan Airport, went to the American compound for lunch and an Americans-only briefing. Then he went to the headquarters of the province chief.

Situation Explained

Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Ngu, a former regimental commander in Vietnam's 25th Division, has been chief of the province for three months. He went to a map and explained the situation.

The provincial official concluded his briefing and Katzenbach sat thoughtfully in the chair. There was a long pause, then Katzenbach said, "What is your biggest problem?"

The province chief explained the situation again, and told the Under Secretary that with the addition of this and the elimination of that the province would be pacified by the end of 1967. The turn

would come next year. Katzenbach listened and nodded.

The official biography of Ngu states that he is fluent in English, but he is not. Katzenbach understood perhaps half of what was said because it was said, partly for reasons of politeness and partly for reasons of pride, in English. The Vietnamese language would have required an interpreter. French would have been inappropriate.

Driving to Nhonhau, Katzenbach saw members of the police field force guarding the road. They saluted. Buses were stopped by the side of the road, and their passengers, always jammed elbow to elbow, were looking out the windows and grinning at the flotilla of jeeps that sped past. Ahead, and at the sides, two armed helicopters made long, slow circles, dipping low.

At the hamlet the local officials stood to one side in a line, bending their wrinkled faces into smiles and saying greetings in a language no one understood. In a tiny hut, the Under Secretary of State was shown a medical kit the cadre used: malaria pills, bandages, aspirin, vitamins, stomach powders.

Katzenbach looked at each one of the items and nodded and turned them over in his hands and smiled and said: "Tell them thank you, but I am not sick now."

'Beau Geste' Forts

Dotted through Vietnam are little Beau Geste forts, many of them built by the French. In Saigon officialese, this is known as district or sector level. Katzenbach was to visit a district chief in his outpost at Xinhphuoc.

The district chief was a major who had fought in the Vietminh against the French. Undermanned and undergunned, he had slowly extended his control of the district. He was known as one of the very good ones, a jaunty, pudgy figure in camouflaged fatigues and knife and revolver.

Katzenbach sat in an easy chair next to a table containing a vase of lillies, lit a cigarette, and listened. Behind him were the aides, the Embassy and U.S. aid men, Americans who dealt with the cadre, the lieutenant colonel who was sector adviser.

Maps were pulled out and the major began to speak. What he talked about in the heat of the afternoon in the north in the middle of Binhphuoc district could have been repeated in any of 100 districts in Vietnam.

The pointer glided over the map, touched a coordinate, lingered, and moved on. On this operation, 12 Vietcong killed, on another, 17 suspects detailed, on yet another, a weapon seizure of one Chinese Communist submachine gun, one rifle. Some of his forces were under strength. Then he talked about the security of the district.

When the formal part was over, one of the Embassy men, familiar with both Vietnam and Longan Province, mo-

tioned for Katzenbach to come to the map. He got the major and an interpreter and asked him to go over it again. They began at the colored map, the one with blue crayon for secure areas, green for insecure, yellow for contested — and there were several shades of yellow.

Why was one area secure and the other not? The Vietcong controlled the eastern part, near the Rungsat special zone. Why? Why weren't outposts linked? Where were there no RF regional forces in this location? Why no PF (popular forces) there? "The operation distinction," the Embassy man said at one point, is that it takes two companies of men to enter the green, and one company to enter the yellow. Both are insecure, but the one is more insecure than the other."

Major Is Optimistic

Katzenbach was looking and nodding at the dialogue between the Embassy man and the major, who was easier and more articulate now in Vietnamese. The major seemed optimistic, but not so optimistic as the province chief, who promised security by the end of 1967.

It was nearly 4 p.m. and there was one more stop to make but Katzenbach detoured to a tiny billet inside

the fort where the American advisers lived.

The Under Secretary was leaving when the major appeared from a side room and handed him a flag. It was a Vietcong flag, with a star in the center, a prize from a nameless battle earlier in the year.

"You're too kind," said Katzenbach, laughing and thanking the major. Then he left the billet and walked out to the helicopters already warming up.

The major pulled the Embassy man to one side, and pointed to Katzenbach as he left the room.

"That," the major said. "Is that your Mr. McNamara?"

"Oh no," the Embassy man said. "That is Mr. Katzenbach. He is the Under Secretary of State."

"Ah," the major nodded. "Ah."